Crashing back to Earth

The rise and fall of Pastor Ted, political animal

By Cara DeGette

Three years to the day that Ted Haggard flew to Washington at George W. Bush's personal request to see the president sign a bill outlawing partial-birth abortion, stunned followers gathered for their Sunday service to listen as a written apology was delivered from their disgraced pastor.

The day before, Haggard, founder of New Life Church and one of the most powerful evangelical leaders in America, had been fired after admitting that he engaged in sexually immoral conduct and that he had bought methamphetamine. The stunning news followed a gay prostitute's claims that he and Haggard had a three-year "sexual business" relationship.

'Run for office. Serve your community. Be a good citizen. Be a good Christian.'

It's a tawdry ending for a man whose meteoric rise landed him in the inner circles of awesome power — including reported weekly telephone contact with the White House. Over the past several years, Haggard had grown increasingly, and unabashedly, political. He jet-setted around the world, meeting with leaders such as Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

This year, Haggard played an intimate role in crafting Colorado's Amendment 43, the measure to restrict marriage to one man and one woman.

And for a time last year Haggard, affectionately called "Pastor Ted" by his followers, even toyed with the idea of running for Congress himself.

Purging Satan

Haggard landed in Colorado Springs in 1984, and founded his church in the basement of his home. From there, he preached from atop an overturned bucket to a group of followers seated on lawn chairs.

Haggard's charisma was magnetic, and his following quickly grew. The church moved to a strip mall before it established its sprawling campus in northern Colorado Springs, across the highway from the United States Air Force Academy. Four years ago, Haggard took the helm of the then-anemic National Association of Evangelicals, an organization whose church membership currently claims 30 million.

As his church and own position of influence expanded, so did Haggard's passion for Republican politics. On Nov. 5, 2003, Haggard was invited to the White House, one of eight Christian leaders brought in to watch the president sign the federal partial-birth abortion ban. He sent a description of the heady experience two days later to his congregation:

"On Monday I was in the World Prayer Center and my cell phone rang," Haggard wrote. "It was one of the special assistants to President Bush calling from the White House. It turns out that when the President was reviewing the list of those attending the signing of the partial birth abortion ban, he asked why I wasn't attending …

"So I rearranged my schedule … and flew to Washington on Tuesday to be at the signing on Wednesday. I sat with those from the Senate and House who voted for the bill, and afterward was escorted to the President's motorcade and taken to the White House.

"I and seven others were able to spend 55 minutes with the President in the Oval office discussing any issue we liked. It was incredible. I'll tell you about the discussion in church."

Praying for politicians

Last year, Haggard confirmed having some interest in running for Congress — assuming that Rep. Joel Hefley, who hadn't yet announced his intentions, planned to retire.

Soon after, at a Focus on the Family-sponsored event in Nashville, Tenn., called Justice Sunday II — in which participants gathered in praise for Supreme Court nominee John Roberts — he encouraged activist Christians to run for political office: "If you have not contemplated it, read, learn to speak and run for office. Serve your community. Be a good citizen. Be a good Christian."

But upon his return, Haggard told the *Independent* that he had decided against a bid for Congress. The prospective media circus, and an unwillingness to give up his other positions, he told the paper, were determining factors.

Kyle Fisk, an associate pastor at one of New Life's satellite churches, took the leap this summer. Fisk challenged incumbent state Rep. Michael Merrifield in the district that includes downtown Colorado Springs, the city's west side and Manitou Springs.

And Fisk got Haggard's blessing for the effort. In a letter of endorsement that was sent to thousands, Haggard asked supporters to send money to, volunteer to help, and pray for Fisk.

His protégé was running in a district that is "the one area in El Paso County that is not currently well represented," Haggard wrote. He did not specify why the district was not represented well — but Merrifield is currently the only Democrat among the county's 13-member legislative delegation.

Haggard's letter for Fisk generated controversy, as the Internal Revenue Service prohibits church pastors from endorsing political candidates. Though Haggard specified he was writing as a "private citizen," and not as a church leader, Merrifield was infuriated.

"If [Haggard] wanted to run for House District 18, he should have jumped in the race himself," said Merrifield, who this week handily beat Fisk.

'A deceiver and a liar'

Also this year, Haggard jumped to the defense of Jeff Crank, the Republican running to replace Hefley, after the Christian Coalition of Colorado sent out attack mailers accusing Crank and another candidate, Colorado Springs Mayor Lionel Rivera, of supporting taxes and the "radical homosexual agenda."

During his July 23 sermon, Haggard included some fire-and-brimstone opinions about Christians who lie.

At the time, Rob Brendle, associate pastor at New Life, explained: "People who are Christian should be telling the truth, and he was saying the Christian Coalition is not a reliable source of information for Christians."

Ultimately, Crank lost to Republican Doug Lamborn — the beneficiary of the attack mailers. This week, Lamborn went on to victory in the general election.

On Sunday, Haggard announced he was going away for awhile. He left behind a letter, read aloud to his stunned flock of 14,000, apologizing for his now-well documented transgressions.

"I am a deceiver and a liar," Haggard wrote. "There is a part of my life that is so repulsive and dark that I've been warring against it all of my adult life. For extended periods of time, I would enjoy victory and rejoice in freedom. Then, from time to time, the dirt that I thought was gone would resurface, and I would find myself thinking thoughts and experiencing desires that were contrary to everything I believe and teach."

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News

You've been punk'd

Despite heartbreak, teens at New Life say they will stay on

By Naomi Zeveloff

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Thousands, including many teenagers, exited the church's stadium-like worship space last Sunday after their first service sans Pastor Ted Haggard.

Even at last Sunday's weepy 9 a.m. service, one New Life Church teenager wore a black T-shirt that seemed to encapsulate the church's youthful spirit: "Satan is a nerd."

'That is separating the wheat from the chaff.'

— 17-year-old New Lifer, on people leaving the church

Unlike their elementary-aged counterparts, the megachurch's massive number of high school and tweenage kids were not asked to leave the service when Pastor Larry Stockstill read the letters penned by Ted and Gayle Haggard, epistles that sought to explain the kind of sins that evangelical young people are repeatedly warned about.

But after the service, several high school members of _tag, New Life's high-tech youth ministry, expressed sympathy for the pastor and pledged not to leave the church — even as they predicted that some of their peers would.

"Just because he messed up doesn't give us the excuse to run away," said one 15-year-old who has attended the church for two and a half years. "Everyone sins."

The young woman, who is a leader in _tag, says the group held an open house just after the news broke, where she prayed that "kids' hearts won't turn away."

Haggard founded the first "tag" group when he led a small weekly service in Baton Rouge, La. It was one pastor's answer to the question of how to keep young people involved in the evangelical movement. It's been a longstanding issue; the National Association of Evangelicals, from which Haggard stepped down as president last week, issued statements this year lamenting a high dropout rate among teenagers.

But _tag and other evangelical youth groups nationwide have capitalized on these concerns, launching a campaign to make evangelicals number at least 4 percent of the youth population.

"I am sure some people might leave," said one 17-year-old who has attended New Life for nearly two years. "That is separating the wheat from the chaff."

By many accounts, the youth movement at New Life, buoyed by Christian rock music, trendy logos and hip leaders, is thriving. And though high schoolers outside Sunday's church service shied away from questioning their former pastor, a robust conversation took place over _tag's group on myspace.com, which boasts more than 500 members.

"Yes, I feel very sad and very confused right now, but it's one of those things I can't control," wrote one 14-year-old. "It's all in God's hands now, and His will is going to be done. Yes, he admitted. Yes, he could be guilty of much more than he will admit. But why should that effect [sic] how we view God?"

Another person had a different take. "Honestly, I don't know whether or not to believe any of this, but I lost respect for Ted Haggard many years ago," wrote one 19-year old. "If any of this is true, then it's a dealbreaker [sic] for me regarding churches and religions in general."

A third posted a template for punk-rock style pins in fuchsia and bright green. "Ted Haggard is my hero," they read.

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